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Editorials: Our Opinion

## **Legal Aid in Civil Matters is Important**

Florida lawmakers are quickly moving through legislation to provide legal aid for needy families dealing with civil litigation.

When indigent citizens get in criminal trouble, public defenders are made available by law. But civil issues involving family law, domestic violence, immigration, financial or housing problems can undermine a person's employment and destabilize a family in short order.

So it is not just compassionate to ensure that legal services of this type are available; it is also in the broader interest of communities and society. And an exemption --- that the money wouldn't be used to fight DUI charges --- is completely appropriate.

Though some \$10 million a year would probably fill the bill for civil legal aid in Florida, just \$500,000 is in the state's strained budget at this time.

Prior to the welfare reform legislation, some federal resources were available for civil legal aid --- that and the vast amount of pro bono work by private attorneys. That's about \$170 million a year from Florida lawyers alone.

It had been hoped to use surplus federal funds earmarked for transitional welfare programs as part of the welfare reform movement, said Florida Bar President Terry Russell of Fort Lauderdale. But those funds wound up set aside for other uses at the same time as Florida faces a budget crisis.

Florida is one of just 11 states that provide no such funding whatever, so it's to lawmakers' credit that HB 491/SB 512 have unanimously passed out of every House and Senate committee to date.

Naples Republicans Dudley Goodlette in the House and Burt Saunders in the Senate, both attorneys, are being supported by our area Reps. Bev Kilmer, Curtis Richardson and Will Kendrick and by Sens. Al Lawson and Richard Mitchell.

The legislation is restricted at this point to, most likely, pilot

programs with the Department of Community Affairs contracting with groups such as the Florida Bar Foundation to distribute the money most effectively.

And much depends upon the availability of funds at the March 8 revenue estimating conference, which will give lawmakers the latest figures on how much they can spend in the 2002-03 budget.

Where there is a will, there is a way, however, and lawmakers have made the vital first step of declaring their determination to extend to the indigent the availability of legal representation in civil matters.